BRANDON LEE'S FINAL MARTIAL ARTS INTERVIEW

Actor/Martial Artist Gave Us a Glimpse of His Personal Life Before Passing

Interview by John Little

Not long before he was cut down last March 31 in a fatal shooting on the set of the movie The Crow, actor/martial artist Brandon Lee, the son of martial arts legend Bruce Lee, consented to what, by our estimation, turned out to be his final martial arts-related interview. Fresh from his critical acclaim in the film Rapid Fire, Lee was looking forward to his next project, The Crow, in which he was to play a rock musician who is murdered, but is then reincarnated and avenges his death.

Interviewer John Little, a senior writer at Flex magazine, spent two hours with Lee, discussing everything from the actor's training regimen and recollections of his late father, to topics such as his father's influence on his acting career and Brandon's own real-life self-defense encounters.

What was it like to be the son of the legendary Bruce Lee? Little dug deep in this exclusive interview and uncovered the answer to that question like no interviewer before him. Ever the straight shooter, Lee refused to camouflage his beliefs or opinions in perhaps his most candid interview ever.

When their lengthy discussion ended, the two shook hands and Lee jokingly punched Little on the arm. "We'll do this again when The Crow is released," he told the interviewer. Sadly, fate had other plans.

We hope you enjoy Brandon Lee's farewell interview. —Ed.

Photo courtesy of Warner Brothers

Before his sudden death last March 31, actor Brandon Lee (right), the son of Bruce Lee, agreed to an interview that included questions about his training routine, his film career, and his legendary father.

BLACK BELT: Is it true that your father first caught the attention of Hong Kong movie producers when, as a five-year-

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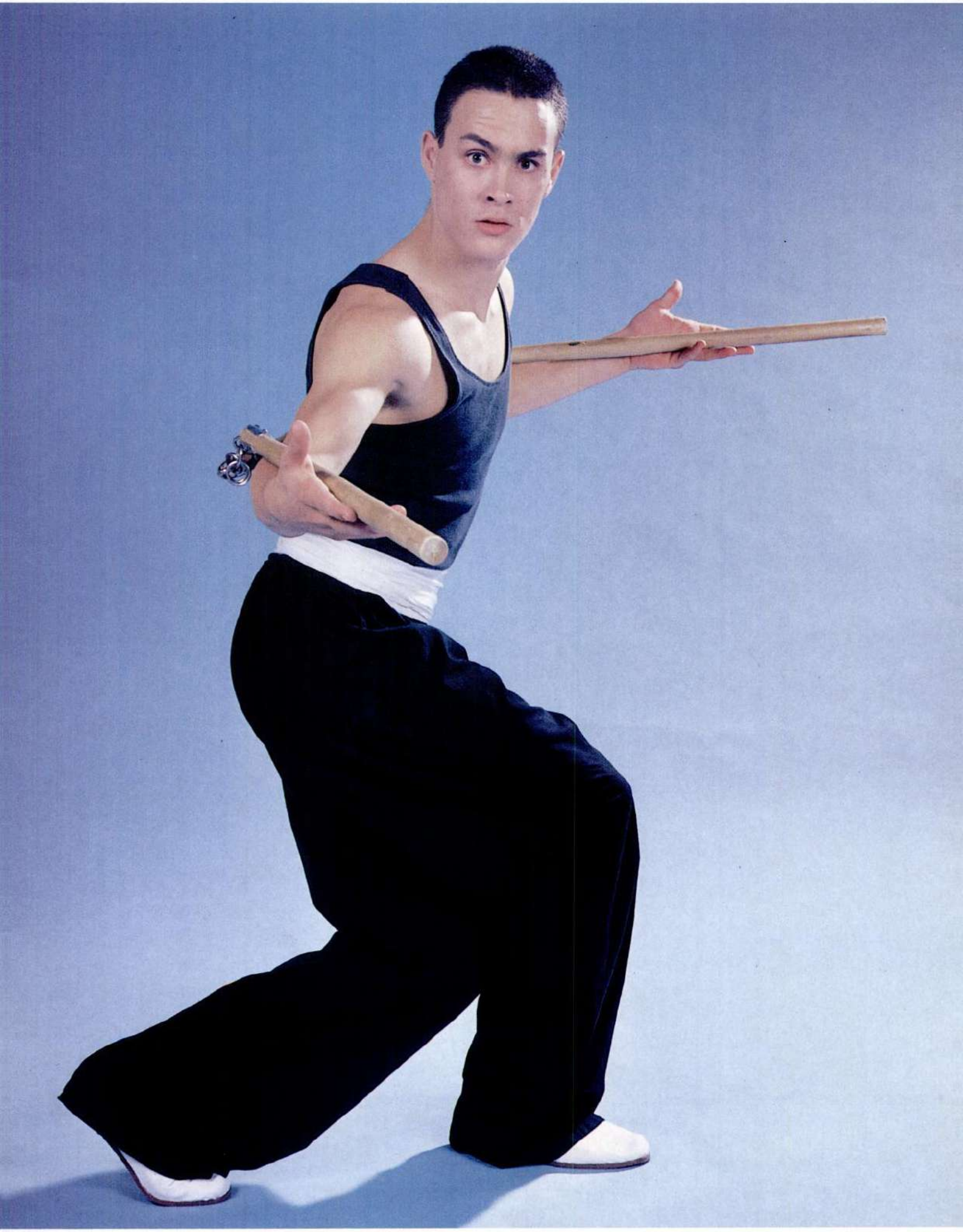

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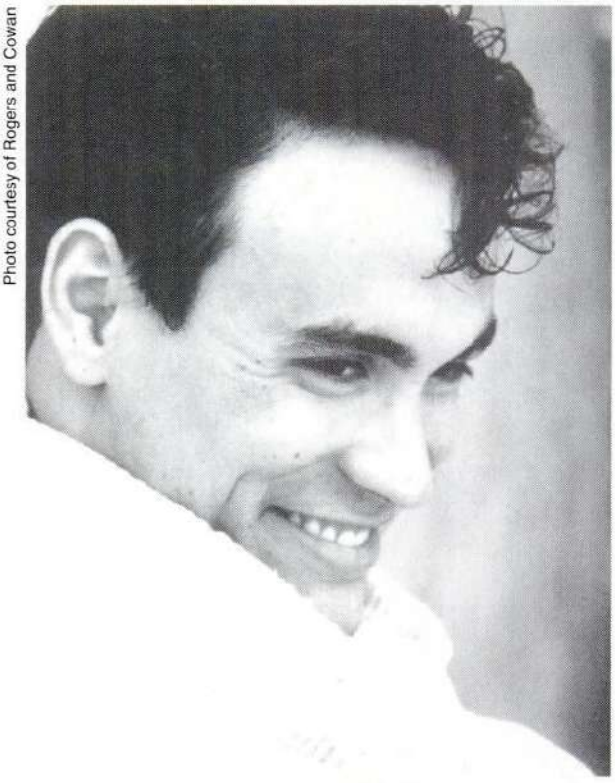

Photo courtesy of Rogers and Cowan

Brandon Lee (above right) made his American motion picture debut in the 1991 film Showdown in Little Tokyo (above), starring opposite Dolph Lundgren.

"I'm not worried about comparisons with my father. I've done my work and I'm happy with it. . . . I respect my father very much, but I'm a very different person than he was."

old, you appeared on Hong Kong television with him and broke some boards?

BRANDON LEE: I wouldn't go so far as to say it was my dad's first big break, but it was one of the first times I performed.

BB: Do you have vivid recollections of that day, or were you too young to remember?

LEE: Oh no, I have vivid recollections of that. My father was going to "present" me to the Hong Kong audience, basically. Being Bruce Lee's son, there was obviously some pressure to break the board, which I did and everything was fine.

BB: Why did you choose acting as a profession?

LEE: I'm not sure, but from the time I was very, very young, that's all I used to tell my mother and father that I was going to do.

BB: Did your father ever try to dissuade you from being an actor?

LEE: No, I think that I was so young back then that my parents just sort of smiled and shook their heads. It was left up to my poor mother alone to find out later that I was serious.

BB: Your first professional acting job was on the 1985 television production *Kung*

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Fu: The Movie. How did you get the part?

LEE: I was working for a producer in Los Angeles, reading scripts and doing synopses of them. One day, Lynn Stalmaster, who had been casting *Kung Fu: The Movie,* came into the office to have a meeting with the producers. The producer I was working with knew I wanted to get into acting and kind of said "Hey, Brandon's an actor. Why don't you let him read (for the part)?" And they did, and I got the part.

BB: What was it like working on the movie with David Carradine?

LEE: David was very nice. He was really good to me when we worked together. I liked him.

BB: Your next film was the Hong Kong production *Legacy of Rage,* then you made your American motion picture debut in *Showdown in Little Tokyo,* starring opposite Dolph Lundgren. How did that role come about?

LEE: I had been out on the audition circuit trying to get jobs like everyone else, and *Showdown* just kind of fell into my lap. At that time, I was trying to get ready to do *Rapid Fire,* but there still wasn't a script and the deal still wasn't set for sure. It was just kind of being worked on when along came this audition for *Showdown*. I got the part, so I did it.

BB: What excited you the most about the *Rapid Fire* project?

LEE: I had the chance on *Rapid Fire* to do the martial arts choreography, along with the stunt coordinator, Jeff Imada. It was the first time I'd ever done the stunt choreography for a film, and that's a kick. It's thrilling and fulfilling to make something up, rehearse it, shoot it, and then see it come to the screen pretty much the way you had it. It was the first time I had a chance to have that much involvement with a film. Sometimes it was scary, but overall it was very fulfilling.

BB: Every actor who makes a movie with martial arts in it runs the risk of being compared to Bruce Lee. In your case, the comparison obviously would run that much deeper. Is being Bruce Lee's son a boon or a drawback to your acting career?

LEE: I don't really feel it is either. All I can tell you is that you cannot make choices in your own career based on trying to live up to a comparison with somebody else. You have to do your own work, based on your own instincts and your own life. I respect my father very much, but I'm a very different person than he was.

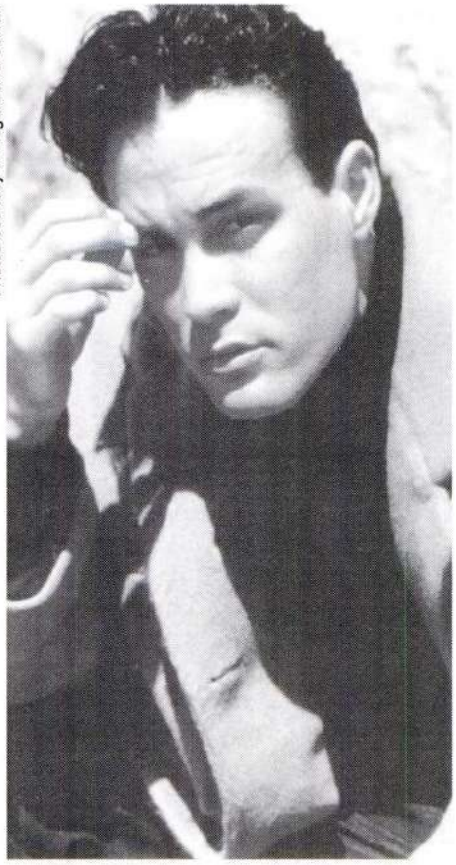
BB: What do you consider the biggest difference?

LEE: Well, I've grown up in a different country; I've had many different influences than he had. Comparisons, to me, are kind of shallow. You can't compare any two people. When Paul Newman was young, they compared him to Marlon Brando all the time, and he hated it. I'm not worried about comparisons with my father. I've done my work and I'm happy with it.

BB: Your father influenced millions of people throughout the world, both through his films and his writing. In what way do you feel his influence the most?

LEE: Wow, that's a really hard question. He was my father. I guess the martial arts, which are an integral part of my life, come entirely from my father. Acting, however, is something I've pursued, to a large degree, on my own. My dad passed away when I was young, so we never really had a chance to get into any real deep conversations about acting. And I've had the opportunity to pursue acting in a lot of different ways that my dad didn't have, because he got into it when he was much older. The martial arts, however, are an area that I'm completely beholding to my dad for. He started me in the martial arts when I could walk. He trained me until he passed away, and even when I continued my training, it was with one of his students. So while I've had some different influences throughout the course of my martial arts training, essentially the martial arts are connected to my dad. I guess that's the strongest influence he's had. ➡

Photos courtesy of Rogers and Cowan



Brandon Lee was 28 years old and was still basking in the success of his 1992 film Rapid Fire when he was killed on the set of his most recent movie project.

"I moved around a lot, and sometimes when I'd go to a different school, there would be somebody there who would want to prove they were tough by beating up Bruce Lee's son."

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Investigation Continues Into Brandon Lee's Death

WILMINGTON, NC—The prosecutor handling the investigation into Brandon Lee's death here on a movie set March 31 said there was negligence in the actor's death, but added that it is too early to determine if criminal charges will be filed.

"In my opinion, I don't think there is any doubt there was negligence on several occasions," New Hanover County District Attorney Jerry Spivey told the *Hollywood Reporter*. "I can tell you we are looking at the written investigative report for the purpose of deciding if there will be criminal charges and, if so, against whom. But there is no indication anybody was trying to hurt Brandon."

Lee, 28, died after he was apparently shot on the set of *The Crow*, a $14-million film that was due to be released this summer.

Spivey told the *Hollywood Reporter* that he needs statements from at least two unnamed witnesses, who left the area after production of *The Crow* was suspended, before he can complete his investigation. Meanwhile, several people who were on the set at the time of the shooting have been re-interviewed, although their identities were not revealed. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, those interviewed in the initial investigation included prop master Daniel Kuttner; Michael Massee, the actor who fired the gun at Lee; special effects assistant Bruce Merlin; and medic Clyde Baisey.

Now that negligence has been established in the incident, officials will likely determine if the negligence was willful or wanton. Both forms of negligence warrant an involuntary manslaughter charge, which is defined as "an illegal act or willful or wanton negligence that leads to accidental death." For such crimes, the standard sentence is three-to-10 years in prison.

If willful or wanton negligence is not established, criminal charges are unlikely to be filed in the shooting.

The gun that was used in the scene in which Lee died was supposed to be loaded with blanks, but officials later removed "what appeared to be a .44-caliber bullet" from Lee's abdomen. The Wilmington Police Department has called Lee's death an accident, but has not made public the results of a state Bureau of Investigations ballistics test, which would determine if the object removed from Lee's abdomen was actually a bullet. Police have referred all calls to the New Hanover County district attorney's office. Spivey did not return repeated phone calls, however.

—Douglas Jeffrey

BB: According to reports, you had to use some of your martial arts skills to disarm a knife-wielding thug who entered your house. Is this true?

LEE: Well, I came home and caught a gentleman in the midst of burglarizing my house. This was the kind of house where all of the rooms were connected, so you could literally run around the house. He looked at me and I looked at him, and I started running at him and he took off, and we ran around the house a couple of times. It was like a Three Stooges routine; it was really silly. In any event, on his last circuit through the kitchen, he picked up a big cutting knife and we squared off in the living room. I've got this scar on my thumb (from where he cut me), and I broke his arm, dislocated his shoulder, and broke his nose and his jaw. Then the police came. I happen to feel that if someone breaks into my home and wields a knife at me, he's given up his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, to a large extent. But I didn't kill him, which I very well could have. I thought that was fair.

BB: Because you are Bruce Lee's son, you probably had your share of confrontations while growing up.

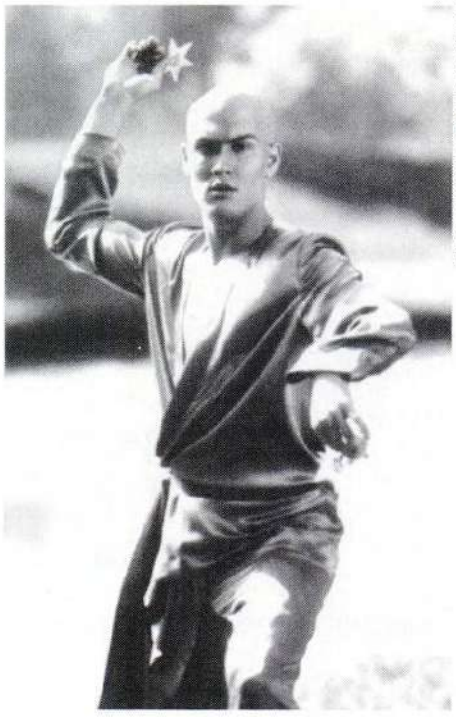

Photo courtesy of Warner Brothers

Brandon Lee (above) made his acting debut in Kung Fu: The Movie, a 1986 television pilot for the series Kung Fu: The Legend Continues.

LEE: Yeah, I had a bunch of stupid encounters when I was growing up. I moved around a lot and attended a lot of different schools, and sometimes when I'd go to a different school there would be somebody there who would want to prove they were tough by beating up Bruce Lee's son. It wasn't that big a deal; no one ever got hurt too badly. It was a big deal at the time when I was 14, but it doesn't seem that important now. You live through it.

BB: How do you keep in shape?

LEE: I like to get up and actually push the television buttons instead of using the remote control. And I buy beers that have twist-off tops—that seems to keep my forearms in shape. No, actually, it depends on what film I'm working on, frankly. The majority of the films I've done have been physical roles, so I've done some pretty hard training leading up to them. I would hit the gym anyway, whether I had a film to do or not, but I wouldn't hit it as hard unless I was playing a role in a film that seemed to call for it. When I'm training hard, it's about four days a week for about five hours a day. I usually don't do any weight training there at all, but I did do some weight training before I did *Rapid Fire*. Frankly, I did it purely for aesthetic reasons because I was playing a character without a shirt on. If it weren't for that, I don't think I would have been doing it.

BB: That's interesting in light of the fact that your father liberated many people from the fear of using weight training as an adjunct to their martial arts training.

LEE: That's true. There used to be the belief among martial artists that weight training would cramp up their muscles and restrict their movement—which I don't think it does if it's performed properly.

BB: So most of your training is directed toward cardiovascular conditioning?

LEE: I do a lot of cardiovascular work. I'm interested in reaching that point when you actually fail from exhaustion at something. When you reach that point where you say "That's it, I can't do another one," you should challenge yourself with something. Maybe you pretend a man has a gun to your mother's head, and he says "If you do one more of whatever exercise you're doing, I won't pull the trigger." Then see if you can do it. I find that you have to make it into a game at some level in order to continue. So that's what I do. I jump a lot of rope, I run, I ride a LifeCycle, and I've gotten into using the Stairmaster. And then I work out down at the (Dan) Inosanto Academy. Sometimes I take the *muay Thai* kickboxing class—which is a hell of a cardiovascular workout.

BB: Do you train in a particular style of

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BRANDON LEE

Continued from page 28

martial arts?

LEE: When people ask me that question, I usually say that my father created the art *jeet kune do* and I have been trained in that. However, that's a little too simple to say because jeet kune do was my father's very personal expression of the martial arts. So I always feel a little bit silly saying I practice jeet kune do, although I certainly have been trained in it. It would be more accurate to say that I practice my own interpretation of jeet kune do, just as everyone who practices jeet kune do does.

BB: Which of your father's films do you enjoy watching the most?

LEE: That's kind of a toss-up between *Return of the Dragon* and *Enter the Dragon. Return of the Dragon* was his third film, and I think his films very clearly evolved from one to the other. Because he wrote, directed and starred in *Return of the Dragon,* it was a very individual film for him. But *Enter the Dragon* is probably my favorite, being that it's the only film that he spoke English in with his own voice, and it certainly had the best production value, so it's the most slick-looking, the most well-polished of the group.

BB: How do you feel about *Way of the*

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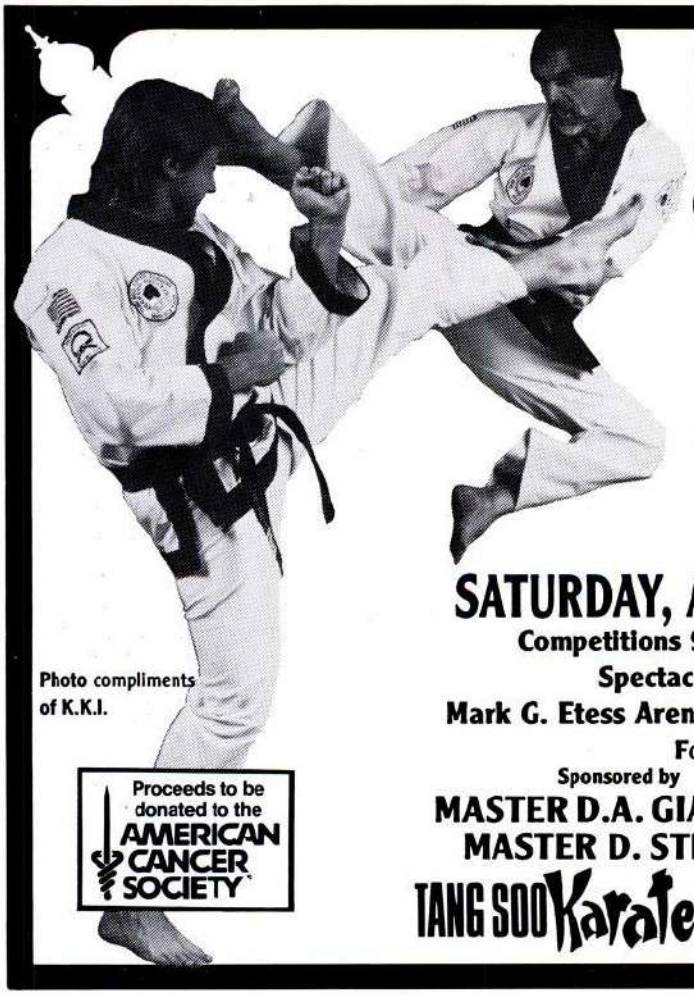

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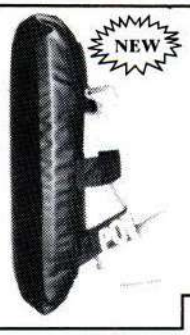

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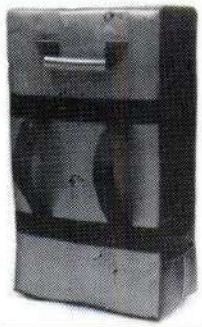

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Dragon, in which your father fights Chuck Norris in a facsimile of the Roman Colosseum?

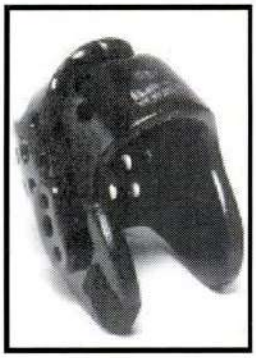
LEE: You know, that was our family cat that appeared at the end of the film in the Colosseum. And the car that pulled up at the end—that red Mercedes Benz—that was our car. My mom still has that car, as a matter of fact. I remember being on the set of that whole Colosseum thing. That fight with Chuck Norris was actually shot on a soundstage in Hong Kong.

BB: Do you have any anecdotes from the set of *Enter the Dragon?*

LEE: One of the interesting sidelights in *Enter the Dragon,* that not too many people realize, occurs in that underground tunnel fight sequence, which is one of my very favorite fight sequences on film. One of the guys who comes in and gets his neck broken by my dad in that sequence is Jackie Chan. Jackie was probably about 17 years old then and was a stunt man.

BB: What advice would you give to today's martial artists?

LEE: My personal opinion would simply be that one should always pay more attention to the spiritual side of the martial arts than to the physical side. I think that is probably an area that initially attracts most people to the martial arts. The majority of people who ask me questions about the



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martial arts seem to center on the spirituality of the martial arts, but they don't seem to really know what they're talking about. The martial arts is a pursuit that, in my mind, is very capable of providing some deep and lasting spiritual experiences, if a person is open to them. When you move down the road toward the mastery of the martial arts, you come up against these barriers inside yourself that will attempt to stop you from continuing. And as you overcome each one of these barriers, you end up learning something about yourself.

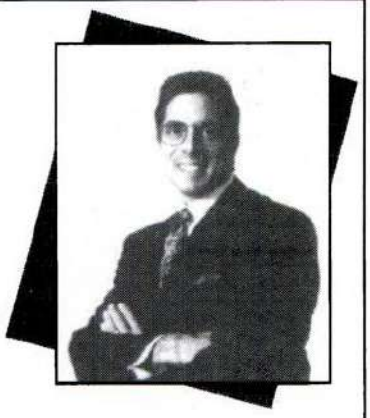
"The martial arts is capable of providing deep and lasting spiritual experiences."

BB: When you think about your father, what comes immediately to mind?

LEE: This is not intended to be rude, but the personal memories I have of my dad are not so many because of how young I was when he passed away. And what memories I do have are actually quite cherished, and I'd really rather keep them to myself.

About the interviewer: John Little is a senior writer at Flex magazine in Woodland Hills, California.

"I DON'T TEACH FOR THE MONEY..."



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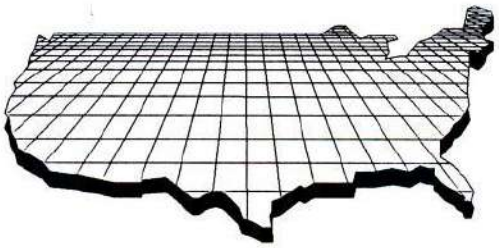

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